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Scholars have uniformly presumed that news media attention to a policy issue increases its impact on presidential job performance evaluations because news coverage enhances the accessibility of beliefs about the issue in citizens’ memories, which automatically increases their impact on relevant judgments. The research reported here demonstrates that media coverage of an issue does indeed increase the cognitive accessibility of related beliefs, but this does not produce priming. Instead, politically knowledgeable citizens who trust the media to be accurate and informative infer that news coverage of an issue means it is an important matter for the nation, leading these people to place greater emphasis on that issue when evaluating the President. Thus, news media priming does not occur because politically naive citizens are “victims” of the architecture of their minds, but instead appears to reflect inferences made from a credible institutional source of information by sophisticated citizens.

When television, radio, and motion pictures joined newspapers as conduits of political information during this century, scholars worried that these communication media might have powerful “hypodermic” effects on the general public’s political attitudes, injecting information and opinions into people’s minds (e.g., Lasswell 1927). But when this hypothesis was subjected to empirical tests, powerful persuasion by the news media appeared to be the exception rather than the rule (Klapper 1960).

During the last two decades, however, it has become clear that the media do indeed shape public opinion. Not only have investigations used improved methods to document persuasion (Page and Shapiro 1992), but new media effects have been identified as well, including agenda setting and news media priming. Agenda setting occurs when extensive media attention to an issue increases its perceived national importance (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Priming occurs when media attention to an issue causes people to place special weight on it when constructing evaluations of overall presidential job performance (Iyengar et al. 1984).

Our focus in this article is on the cognitive mediators of news media priming. To specify the mediators of an effect is to identify the mechanisms by which one factor affects another (Baron and Kenny 1986). In the case of priming, news media attention to an issue presumably causes a change in a

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The authors would like to thank Shannon Davis, Stephanie Gray, and Greg Robinson for their help in collecting the data analyzed here. The authors are also grateful to Shanto Iyengar, Vincent Price, Tom Nelson, Kathleen McGraw, and Penny Visser for very helpful suggestions. This research was supported by the National Institute of Mental Health (Grant T32-MH19728-03, providing a predoctoral traineeship to the first author). This manuscript was written partly while the second author was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, supported by the National Science Foundation Grant SBR-9022192. All data and documentation necessary to replicate the analyses reported here are available from the authors.


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mediating variable in the minds of citizens, which in turn produces a change in the weight they attach to the issue when evaluating presidential job performance. Scholars studying news media priming have uniformly presumed that the cognitive mediator at work is the accessibility of issue-related information in memory (e.g., Iyengar et al. 1984; Price and Tewksbury 1997). Yet to date, this presumption has never been tested. And no studies have yet evaluated another possibility: that priming might be mediated by national importance judgments instead. Therefore, we explore whether media coverage of an issue causes an increase in either the accessibility of related attitudes or in the perceived national importance of the issue, which then, in turn, cause priming.

In addition to exploring these possibilities, we also investigated the moderators of priming. To specify moderators is to identify the circumstances under which priming is most likely to occur and to identify the most influenced citizens (Baron and Kenny 1986). Some past research has done the latter, focusing on differences between political experts and novices (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar et al. 1984). However, the findings from these studies are decidedly mixed, and no work has considered an alternative possible moderator suggested by theories of persuasion in psychology: trust in the media. We therefore set out in the following studies to test the notion that priming might be strongest among people highly trusting of the news media and to explore the moderating impact of political knowledge while controlling for media trust.

Mediators of Priming

Accessibility

Psychologists use the term “priming” to describe occasions when an event increases the accessibility of a construct in people’s memories (i.e., the ease with which it comes to mind), and this is presumed to enhance the impact of the construct on relevant judgments made subsequently (e.g., Higgins and King 1981). Much work in psychology confirms that priming does, in fact, occur in this way (e.g., Bargh and Pietromonaco 1982). Since its inception, the notion of news media priming has been described explicitly in these terms: news media coverage of an issue presumably makes information about it particularly available in people’s memories (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Price and Tewksbury 1997). As a consequence, this information presumably comes to mind automatically when people search for criteria with which to evaluate the President. Thus, the same process that has been shown to underlie accessibility effects on attitudes in the psychology literature is presumed to underlie the media’s effects on evaluations of the President.

For example, according to Iyengar and Kinder (1987, 65): “The standards citizens use to judge a president may be substantially determined by which stories newscasts choose to cover and, consequently, which considerations are made generally accessible.” Iyengar et al. (1984) referred to this proposal as the “accessibility hypothesis,” and Iyengar (1991, 130–136) described news media priming as one manifestation of the “accessibility bias” in political judgments. Likewise, Price and Tewksbury (1997, 197) argued recently:

“First, a media message renders one or another construct applicable, and that construct—say unemployment—is activated. By virtue of its activation, and in direct proportion to the recency and frequency of its activation, that construct remains temporarily accessible. . . . Subsequently, when a person is called on to evaluate the performance of the president, unemployment is likely to be activated. Unless screened out as inapplicable to the evaluation, it will be used as a basis for making a judgment . . . of presidential performance.”

Thus, the theory of media priming views people as victims of the architecture of their minds—if a political issue is activated in people’s memories by media attention to it, they presumably use the concept when asked to make political judgments—not by conscious choice, but merely because information about the issue appears automatically and effortlessly in consciousness.

Agenda Setting

Some scholars studying agenda setting have presumed that it, like priming, is mediated by accessibility (e.g., Price and Tewksbury 1997). However, there is another possible cognitive mediator of agenda setting: inference (Cohen 1973; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Weaver et al. 1981). Newspaper and television news stories often make explicit statements about the importance of an issue in order to justify attention to it. However, even when such statements are not made, most readers and viewers probably recognize that devoting attention to an issue means that editors and reporters believe the issue is a significant one for the country (see, e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Consequently, people may infer from the media that an issue is nationally important.

If so, it would seem natural, and even responsible, for people to place greater weight on that issue when
evaluating the President. Thus, news coverage may influence perceptions of national importance, which in turn may govern the ingredients of presidential performance appraisals. Given how much writing about the media has noted priming and agenda-setting effects side by side, it is remarkable that no one has yet tested the possibility that the latter might mediate the former, as we shall.

**Moderators of Priming**

**Trust in the Media**

If priming is indeed mediated by national importance judgments, and if agenda setting is mediated by the inference process we have outlined, then much research in psychology suggests that both priming and agenda setting may be most likely to occur among people who trust the competence and motives of media personnel the most. Numerous studies have shown that trustworthy sources are more persuasive than more dubious sources (e.g., Eagly and Chaiken 1993). Likewise, readers and viewers who trust the judgment of news personnel may be most inclined to accept their beliefs about national problem importance, whether conveyed implicitly or explicitly by their stories, and may therefore be more likely to manifest agenda setting and priming.

The role of trust in regulating news media priming has not yet been explored empirically. And although Iyengar and Kinder (1985) found that people who trusted the media more were more susceptible to agenda setting, Miller and Wanta (1996) found no relation between trust and agenda setting. Therefore, further investigation of the role of media trust in regulating agenda setting and priming seems merited.

**Political Knowledge**

The notions that national importance judgments mediate priming and that agenda setting occurs via inference also imply that priming may be moderated by political knowledge. In order to culled from a news story the implication that its focus is nationally important, a person must have enough cognitive resources available to think beyond the explicit content of the story. And people who know a lot about politics are likely to find it easiest to do this. Because agenda setting may be strongest among these people, priming may be as well.

From the start of priming research, however, scholars have presumed that people who know the least about politics are the most vulnerable. In the words of Iyengar et al., “Novices have their minds full just coming to terms with the meaning of what is being said; in a sense, they are swept away” (1984, 780). In contrast, Krosnick and Kinder (1990) argued, political experts’ dense and well-organized knowledge about politics reduces the novelty of new information and equips them to interpret new information in ways that merely reinforce their predilections rather than challenge them.

However, the hypothesis that the least politically knowledgeable should manifest the largest priming effects has not fared especially well under the harsh lights of empirical scrutiny. Although some priming studies have found politically knowledgeable people to be significantly less influenced than people who possess less information (Iyengar et al. 1984; Krosnick and Kinder 1990), other tests have found no reliable differences between political experts and novices in the magnitude of priming (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Likewise, some past studies have found less agenda setting among more politically knowledgeable people (Weaver et al. 1981) and among better-educated citizens (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Weaver et al. 1981), while other studies have found stronger agenda setting among more educated people (Hill 1985), and yet another study found no moderating effects of education (Iyengar 1979).

Recently, Krosnick and Brannon (1993) suggested a possible explanation for this apparent inconsistency. They pointed out that in order to manifest priming, a person must understand the story, store its content or implications in memory, and retrieve that stored information at a later time. And political expertise is likely to facilitate these processes. They argued that past priming studies may have failed to observe this effect of knowledge because they did not isolate knowledge from other, positively correlated, confounding factors that might exert opposite effects on priming.

Specifically, political knowledge is positively correlated with exposure and attention to media content, and exposure and attention are likely to dilute priming effects, not enhance them. That is, the more news stories a person is exposed to and thinks carefully about, the more potential bases for presidential evaluations are primed, so the less impact any one of these criteria is likely to have. In contrast, people who are minimally exposed and attentive are likely to have received information about only the few “top” issues of the day. Consequently, each of these issues will enjoy enhanced impact, with little competition from other issues. These latter individuals may, therefore, manifest especially strong priming effects for top stories. And if these effects of exposure and attention were confounded with the effects of knowledge in past studies, the net effect could have gone in any direction, because its constituents are oppositely signed. Consistent with this reasoning,
Krosnick and Brannon (1993) found that when the effects of knowledge, media exposure, and attention were all estimated simultaneously in a single multivariate analysis, priming was stronger among more knowledgeable individuals and those who were less exposed and attentive to political news.

All this is important because knowledge and media trust are negatively correlated (see, e.g., Robinson and Kohut 1988). The greatest priming and agenda-setting effects may be apparent only among the relatively unusual group of citizens who are both highly knowledgeable and highly trusting of the media. And the effects of knowledge and trust may become apparent only when both are considered simultaneously in multivariate analyses, because of the negative correlation between them.

Overview of Studies

We report the results of two experimental studies exploring the hypotheses previously outlined. In the first, we manipulated exposure to media stories about illegal drugs and immigration and tested whether priming is mediated by agenda setting and moderated by media trust and political knowledge. In the second study, we manipulated exposure to media stories about crime, pollution, and unemployment, again tested whether trust and knowledge moderated priming, and explored whether priming is mediated by accessibility.

Study 1: Drugs and Immigration

Procedure
Respondents in this study were 286 adults ages 17–53.\(^1\) They visited a laboratory in groups of no more than eight at a time and were told that they would be participating in a study on selective perception—the way people's political attitudes influence their evaluations of television news. They first completed a questionnaire assessing their general knowledge about politics and their party identification. Then they watched a videotaped compilation of stories from television news broadcasts of the national networks (ABS, CBS, and NBC) during the prior year.

All respondents saw the same five stories about non-political issues. Respondents were randomly assigned to see two additional stories on illegal drugs, two additional stories on immigration, or no additional stories. They then completed a questionnaire measuring beliefs about the national importance of problems, assessments of President Bill Clinton's job performance and his handling of specific issues, their knowledge about illegal drugs and immigration, and trust in the news media.\(^2\)

Measures

National importance. Respondents were asked to list the most important problems facing the country; up to three answers were coded. A coder who was not informed about the hypotheses decided whether each response referred to drugs, immigration, or neither.\(^3\) A national importance index was created for each target issue (drugs and immigration), coded 1 if a person mentioned the issue and 0 if not. 32 percent listed drugs, and 14 percent listed immigration.

Approval of presidential performance. Respondents were asked whether they approved or disapproved of President Clinton's overall job performance and his performance in handling the issues of illegal drugs and immigration on the same scale. Responses were coded 1 = strongly approve, .66 = approve, .33 = disapprove, and 0 = strongly disapprove. 65 percent of the sample strongly approved or approved of President Clinton's job performance.\(^4\) 60 percent strongly approved or approved of President Clinton's handling of the issue of illegal drugs, and 62 percent strongly approved or approved of his handling of immigration.

Political knowledge. There has been some debate about whether political knowledge is best conceived as topic-specific or general across all of politics (see, e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Iyengar 1990; Zaller 1990). To construct a maximally valid measure, we combined questions assessing general political knowledge with items assessing knowledge about the two target issues.

Seventeen general political knowledge questions were selected from Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1996) set;

\(^1\)The respondents were enrolled in an introductory psychology course at Ohio State University during autumn quarter, 1995. 58 percent of these individuals were 17–18 years old, 25 percent were 19 years old, and 17 percent were 20 years old or older; 46 percent were male, and 83 percent were white.

\(^2\)Exposure and attention to our news stories were held constant across respondents within each of the experimental conditions, but highly knowledgeable people most likely arrived for the experiment having seen and/or read more news stories in recent days than less knowledgeable people. If those stories diluted the impact of the stories to which people were exposed during our experiments, this would have attenuated the effects of knowledge that we expected to observe.

\(^3\)To assess the reliability of the coding, a second coder rated the statements independently. The correlation between the two coders' judgments was .98, suggesting very high reliability.

\(^4\)51 percent of respondents in the 1995 National Election Study pilot survey, conducted during the same time as our study, strongly approved or approved of President Clinton's job performance.
one question assessed knowledge about drug policy, and two questions assessed knowledge about immigration policy. Scores on the knowledge test were normally distributed, as is the case with nationally representative populations (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 153). Respondents who scored at or below the median percent correct across all twenty questions were categorized as possessing low knowledge (coded as 0), and those who scored above the median were categorized as possessing high knowledge (coded as 1).^5

**Media trust.** Good journalism involves accurate and unbiased coverage of important issues (e.g., Friedlander, Marsh, and Masterson 1987). In the opinions of some citizens, the media generally attain these goals, but to other readers, listeners, and viewers, the media’s performance is less than adequate. To capture the confidence that our respondents had in the performance of the news media, we asked them three questions about the degree to which the media attain these ideals, focusing on accuracy, bias, and the importance of issues: “Do news organizations usually get the facts straight, or are their stories and reports often inaccurate?” “Do the media usually deal fairly with all sides, or do the media tend to favor one side?” and “Do news organizations often get people upset over unimportant issues, or do news organizations focus on the important problems of the day?” Each question was answered on a scale ranging from 1 (meaning low accuracy, high bias, or focus on unimportant issues) to 7 (meaning high accuracy, low bias, or focus on important issues); these ratings were averaged to yield a single media trust score. People who fell at or below the median were categorized as low in trust (coded 0), and those who fell above the median were categorized as high in trust (coded 1).^6

^5Treating knowledge as continuous yielded results that were consistent with, although weaker than, the ones reported here, and an analysis treating knowledge as a three-level categorical variable yielded similar results.

^6To assess the structure of these items, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL, in which we specified that the three items loaded on a single latent factor. The factor loadings for all three items were statistically significant ($\beta = .44, .78,$ and .22, t = 3.07, 3.28, and 2.49, respectively), and the model was just-identified, so it fit the data perfectly. Weighting the items by factor-score coefficients reflecting their unequal loadings did not change the results of our analyses of priming. Cronbach’s alpha for the three-item index of media trust was .43. The sum of these items was distributed normally, which is in line with national surveys’ measurements of media trust done at about the same time (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 1996; Rosenstone et al. 1997; Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press 1994).

^7Treating trust as continuous yielded results consistent with, albeit slightly weaker than, those reported here. In addition, an analysis treating trust as a three-level categorical variable yielded similar results.

**Party Identification.** Responses were coded 0 for strong Republicans (20 percent of respondents), .25 for weak Republicans (21 percent of respondents), .50 for Independents (33 percent), .75 for weak Democrats (18 percent), and 1 for strong Democrats (8 percent).

**Results**

**Priming.** The priming hypothesis proposes that the impact of evaluations of the President’s handling of a specific issue on overall performance evaluations should have been greater among people who saw news stories about the issue than among those who did not. One approach to testing this hypothesis would be to examine the priming effect separately for each issue. We conducted a more efficient and powerful single test by averaging the corresponding performance terms across issues, which amounts to constraining the various effects to be equal across issues (see Kenny 1979, 69–70).^8

This entailed estimating the parameters of Model 1 in Table 1.

In this equation, drug exposure was coded 1 for respondents who saw news stories about drugs and 0 for respondents who did not see news stories about drugs. Immigration exposure was coded 1 for respondents who saw stories about immigration and 0 for respondents who did not. Issue performance is the average of drug performance and immigration performance, and the (issue performance × issue exposure) interaction is the average of two products: (drug performance × drug exposure) and (immigration performance × immigration exposure). The effect of issue performance represents the average effect of drug and immigration performance among people not exposed to stories about each issue, and the (issue performance × exposure) interaction estimates the difference between that average effect and the average effect among people who did see news stories on each issue. Therefore, this is a single test of priming. If this interaction is statistically significant and positive, it would mean that respondents exposed to news stories about an issue weighed that issue more heavily in their overall evaluations of President Clinton’s performance than did respondents not exposed to news stories about the issue.

As Model 1 in Table 1 shows, among people not exposed to news stories on each issue, the effect of issue performance was positive and statistically significant ($b = .33, p < .001$). As the priming hypothesis predicts, the (issue performance × exposure) interaction was positive and marginally significant ($b = .31, p < .08$), meaning that issue performance had more impact on overall

^8It is not possible to average the two exposure terms, because their average would be a constant across respondents.
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<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Full Sample</th>
<th>High Knowledge/High Trust Respondents</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>.36***</td>
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Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, and standard errors appear in parentheses.

$p < .10$  \hspace{1cm} $^*p < .05$  \hspace{1cm} $^***p < .001$
evaluations among people who saw stories about the issue than among people who did not.9

Agenda setting. To test for agenda setting, we examined whether exposure to stories on an issue led people to cite it more often as one of the nation’s most important problems. As with priming, we designed a test to yield a single coefficient estimating the effect of media exposure on national importance judgments, combining across issues. Doing so here required estimation of the parameters of the following equation via a repeated-measures logistic regression using the probit function:

\[
\text{National importance} = a + b_1 (\text{issue exposure}) + b_2 (\text{issue}) + b_3 (\text{RD}_1) + \ldots + b_{191} (\text{RD}_{189})
\]  

(1)

Issue exposure was coded 1 for respondents exposed to stories on an issue and 0 for respondents not exposed. Issue was a dummy variable identifying the issue (coded 0 for judgments about drugs and 1 for judgments about immigration), and RD1 through RD189 were dummy variables identifying the respondents.10

The issue exposure coefficient tests the difference between respondents who saw news stories about an issue and those who did not in terms of their likelihood of listing that issue as nationally important. As expected, the effect of issue exposure on national importance was positive and significant \( (b = 1.33, \text{se} = .18, p < .001) \). Therefore, in line with the agenda-setting hypothesis, people exposed to news stories about an issue viewed it as more nationally important than people not exposed to such stories.

9 Constraining the effect of issue performance to be equal across issues and constraining the priming effect to be equal across issues did not significantly compromise the fit of the equation to the data (F(2, 279) = 1.67, n.s.), meaning that the coefficients for the two issues were not significantly different from one another. We obtained similar but somewhat weaker results when we estimated priming separately by issue.

10 We conducted this analysis using an approach recommended by Ludd and McClelland (1989, chapter 14). For this analysis, each respondent contributed two sets of data points, one for each issue. A data file was constructed containing 572 lines of data (286 respondents \( \times \) 2 issues). Each line of the file included two principal variables (national importance judgments and issue exposure) and 190 dummy variables used to control for nonindependence. On the first 286 lines of the data file, national importance represented the importance of the drug issue to each respondent, and issue exposure indicated whether or not each respondent had seen the drug stories (coded 1 for respondents who did and 0 for the others). On the second set of 286 lines in the data file, national importance represented the importance of immigration to each respondent, and issue exposure indicated whether or not each respondent had seen the immigration stories (coded 1 for people who did and 0 for the others). Principal advantages of this repeated measures analytic approach are that it combines across issues and controls for differences between respondents that would otherwise be treated as unexplained error variance. Thus, this approach yields a more powerful test of agenda setting.

Mediation by national importance judgments. To determine whether assessments of national importance mediated the priming effect, we followed a procedure outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986). According to this procedure, one must compare the size of the effect of the independent variable (in this case, the interaction between media exposure and issue performance judgments) on the dependent variable (overall performance assessments) with the size of the effect of the independent variable controlling for the proposed mediator (national importance judgments). Evidence that the effect of the independent variable is significantly smaller when controlling for the proposed mediator would be consistent with the mediational hypothesis, and no decrease in the effect would challenge that hypothesis.

To make this comparison, we estimated the parameters of Model 2 in Table 1. The national importance term was the average of assessments of the national importance of drugs and immigration, and the (issue performance \( \times \) national importance) interaction was the average of the two issue-specific products: (drug performance \( \times \) drug national importance) and (immigration performance \( \times \) immigration national importance). The (issue performance \( \times \) national importance) interaction assesses whether respondents who did list the issue as nationally important weighted it differently in deriving overall presidential evaluations than people who did not list the issue as nationally important.

If national importance judgments mediated priming, then the (issue performance \( \times \) exposure) interaction in Model 2 should be significantly weaker than in Model 1. This is so because Model 2 controls for the hypothesized mediator (i.e., national importance) in regulating issue weighting (for a more detailed explanation, see Baron and Kenny 1986). OLS estimates of Model 2's parameters appear in the second column of Table 1. The (issue performance \( \times \) exposure) interaction in Model 2 was marginal significant \( (b = .34, p < .07) \) and slightly larger than in Model 1 \( (b = .31, p < .08) \). This means that national importance assessments did not mediate priming.

In order for national importance to mediate priming, two conditions must be present. First, media exposure must have a significant effect on national importance judgments (the basic agenda-setting effect), as was the case in this study. Second, increased national importance of an issue must be associated with a stronger impact of that issue on overall performance evaluations (in simple terms, the mediator must have a significant effect on the dependent variable). We must test whether this condition obtained by estimating the parameters of Model 3 in Table 1, because the equation must not include the effect of media exposure (see Baron and Kenny 1986). The
(issue performance × national importance) interaction was not significant (b = .03, n.s.), which indicates that national importance did not mediate priming because increased national importance of an issue was not associated with stronger impact of that issue on overall performance evaluations.\textsuperscript{11}

Knowledge and trust. If political knowledge and/or media trust moderate priming, the magnitude of the effect of the (issue performance × exposure interaction) on overall performance judgments would vary depending on the level of knowledge or trust (see Baron and Kenny 1986). In order to test this, we must estimate interactions between the proposed moderators and the independent variable. These effects must be estimated without controlling for any proposed mediators (such as national importance judgments). If the proposed mediator were to be included in equations testing for moderation, then the resulting regression coefficients would be estimated holding the mediator constant, which would undermine the test.

To examine whether political knowledge and media trust moderated priming, we estimated the parameters of Model 4 in Table 1. The (issue performance × exposure × knowledge) and (issue performance × exposure × trust) interactions test whether the effect of exposure on the weight given to issue-specific performance judgments varied depending on level of political knowledge and level of media trust, respectively. Neither interaction was significant (b = -.42, n.s., and b = -.50, n.s., respectively). However, the (issue performance × exposure × knowledge × trust) interaction was significant (b = 1.75, p < .05); it tests whether the strength of the priming effect varied across levels of political knowledge and media trust in a nonadditive fashion. In order to illuminate the nature of this interaction, we estimated Model 1 separately for four groups of respondents: (1) people low in knowledge and low in trust, (2) people low in knowledge and high in trust, (3) people high in knowledge and low in trust, and (4) people high in knowledge and high in trust. The priming effects in the four groups were: .41 (se = .29, n.s.), −.17 (se = .44, n.s.), −.03 (se = .29, n.s.), and 1.14 (se = .46, p < .05), respectively. So priming occurred reliably only among people who both knew a lot about politics and trusted the media.

To explore whether national importance judgments mediated priming among these people, we estimated Models 5 and 6 in Table 1 using only their data. The (issue performance × exposure) interaction (i.e., the basic priming effect) was significant in Model 5 (b = 1.14, p < .05) but not in Model 6 (b = .61, n.s.), and this drop was statistically significant (z = 1.74, p < .04).\textsuperscript{12} Therefore, among people high in knowledge and media trust, national importance did indeed mediate priming. This was the case because exposure to stories about an issue increased the perceived national importance of the issue (the agenda-setting coefficient for people high in both political knowledge and trust was 2.51, se = .69, p < .001), which in turn increased the weight these people placed on that issue in formulating overall presidential performance evaluations (b = .95, p < .05, see Model 7 in Table 1).\textsuperscript{13}

\section*{Study 2: Crime, Pollution, and Unemployment}

All of Study 1's findings can in principle be explained by accessibility. Perhaps media coverage of an issue enhanced the accessibility of information about that issue, and this enhanced accessibility yielded both agenda setting and priming among people high in knowledge and trust. We therefore conducted a second experiment to test explicitly whether accessibility mediates priming. The procedure mirrored that of Study 1, except that attitude accessibility was measured instead of national importance judgments.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12}All tests of mediation involved testing such decreases in coefficients, and they were done using a procedure developed by Sobel (1982).

\textsuperscript{13}To see whether exposure to stories on an issue increased the impact of national importance judgments in weighting the constituents of overall evaluations, we tested the (issue performance × exposure × national importance) interaction, which turned out not to be significant (b = −.21, se = .35, p > .50). This does not challenge the conclusion that national importance judgments mediated priming.

\textsuperscript{14}We did not assess accessibility and national importance judgments in the same study because doing so would not permit a clean test of the impact of either variable. Accessibility must be measured before all other variables are measured, because asking for other judgments previously would contaminate the reaction-time measurements by speeding them up and perhaps equating them across issues (Fazio 1990). Asking questions to measure accessibility increases the accessibility of the issues asked about, which could contaminate answers to later open-ended questions.
Procedure
For this study, 367 adults ages 17–40 visited a laboratory in groups of no more than eight people. All respondents first filled out a questionnaire measuring general political knowledge and party identification. Then, everyone saw a compilation of television news stories, including the same five nonpolitical stories used in Study 1. One-third of the respondents (selected randomly) saw two additional stories on crime; another one-third instead saw two stories on pollution; and the final one-third instead saw two stories on unemployment. Next, respondents were seated individually in small rooms in front of computers, on which they reported whether they approved or disapproved of President Clinton’s handling of a series of issues. Respondents then filled out a questionnaire measuring presidential performance evaluations, media trust, and issue-specific knowledge.

Measures

Performance evaluations and media trust. Measures of overall presidential approval, approval of issue-specific presidential performance, and media trust were identical to those in Study 1, except that the issues “crime,” “pollution,” and “unemployment” were used. 65 percent of the sample strongly approved or approved of President Clinton’s overall job performance. 73 percent, 73 percent, and 63 percent of respondents strongly approved or approved of President Clinton’s handling of crime, pollution, and unemployment, respectively.

Accessibility. Psychologists measure construct accessibility via reaction time; the more quickly an attitude is reflected, the more accessible it is in memory (e.g., Fazio 1990). Therefore, if television news stories about an issue make relevant information in people’s memories more accessible, then such information should be retrieved more quickly later among people who have seen these stories than among people who have not.

Accessibility was gauged here using data collection and analytic procedures developed by Fazio (1990). When seated at a computer, respondents evaluated President Clinton’s handling of each target issue (crime, pollution, and unemployment) twice and evaluated his handling of nine other issues once each. On each trial, the name of an issue appeared in the middle of the computer screen, and respondents pressed one of two buttons, labeled “approve” and “disapprove.” The length of time between the appearance of each issue name and the pressing of a button was recorded by the computer.

After subjecting the response times to a reciprocal transformation (to normalize the distributions), the response times of the two evaluations of presidential performance on each target issue were averaged. To control for differences between people in the speed with which they made all judgments, the mean response time for the nine filler issues was subtracted from the mean response time for each target issue. The resulting three scores were then standardized to place them all on a common metric (unconfounded by differences in the familiarity of the issue labels); larger numbers indicated greater accessibility.

Political knowledge. General political knowledge was assessed by asking respondents six of the questions from Study 1, and knowledge about crime, pollution, and unemployment was assessed by asking respondents three questions on each issue. Respondents who scored at or below the median percent correct across all fifteen general and issue-specific knowledge questions were categorized as possessing low knowledge (coded as 0), and those who scored above the median were categorized as possessing high knowledge (coded as 1).

The respondents were enrolled in an introductory psychology course at Ohio State University during autumn quarter, 1993. 61 percent of these individuals were ages 17–18, 20 percent were 19 years old, and 19 percent were 20 or older; 33 percent were male, and 81 percent were white. 40 percent were Republicans, 27 percent were Independents, and 33 percent were Democrats.

59 percent of respondents in the 1993 National Election Study pilot survey, conducted during the same time as our study, approved or strongly approved of President Clinton’s job performance. As with Study 1, responses on the trust index were normally distributed, which matched distributions uncovered by national surveys done at the time (e.g., Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press 1993).

Response times less than 501 milliseconds (so fast that respondents probably accidentally pressed a button or did not read the issue name) and greater than 7000 milliseconds (so slow that respondents probably were not concentrating exclusively on the task) were considered to be invalid measurements. We therefore treated these as instances of missing data and created our measures of accessibility using the remaining valid measurements from each respondent (see Fazio 1990). On average, only seven respondents out of the total of 367 failed to provide valid accessibility data on each item.

Scores on the continuous knowledge index were normally distributed.
Results

Priming. We tested the basic priming effect by estimating the parameters of Model 1 in Table 2. The (issue performance x exposure) interaction was again positive and significant (b = .45, p < .05), meaning that priming occurred as expected.

Mediation by accessibility. We explored whether the accessibility of presidential evaluations mediated the priming effect by estimating the parameters of Model 2 in Table 2. The accessibility term was the average of the accessibility of crime, pollution, and unemployment attitudes, and the (issue performance x accessibility) interaction was the average of the three issue-specific products: (crime performance x crime accessibility), (pollution performance x pollution accessibility), and (unemployment performance x unemployment accessibility). The (issue performance x accessibility) interaction assesses whether respondents who were quicker at reporting their attitudes on the issue weighted it differently in deriving overall presidential evaluations than people who were slower at reporting their attitudes on the issue.

If accessibility mediated priming, then the (issue performance x exposure) interaction in Model 2 of Table 2 would be significantly weaker than in Model 1 of Table 2. However, the interaction in Model 2 was significant (b = .46, p < .05) and slightly larger than in Model 1 (b = .45, p < .05). Therefore, accessibility did not mediate priming.19

To clarify why this was so, we explored which of the two necessary conditions for mediation was not met. The first is that exposure to stories about an issue must have elevated the accessibility of performance evaluations on that issue, which psychological research suggests should have occurred (e.g., Higgins and King 1981). To test this, we conducted a repeated-measures OLS regression predicting accessibility with exposure, two dummy variables representing the three issues, and 384 dummy variables representing the respondents. The exposure effect was indeed positive and significant (b = .19, se = .05, p < .001), meaning that exposure to stories on an issue increased the accessibility of presidential performance evaluations on that issue. Importantly, this attests to the validity of our accessibility measure.

However, more accessible issue-specific performance evaluations did not have more impact on overall perfor-

19Mediation of priming by accessibility does not require that the (issue performance x exposure x accessibility) interaction be significant. This interaction tests a different hypothesis: that exposure to stories about an issue might increase the role of accessibility in moderating the impact of an issue on overall performance evaluations. We tested this three-way interaction and found that it was not statistically significant (b = -.05, se = .16, p > .75).

mance assessments than less accessible issue-specific performance evaluations (b = -.04, n.s., see Model 3 in Table 2). This is why accessibility did not mediate priming. Contrary to a great deal of prior speculation, then, people do not seem to base presidential performance evaluations on handling of the issues that come to mind more readily.

Knowledge and trust. To test whether priming was strongest among people who were high in both political knowledge and media trust (as in Study 1), we created a new variable, called trustknow, coded 1 for people high in both knowledge and trust and 0 for everyone else. We then estimated the parameters of Model 4 in Table 2. The (issue performance x exposure x trustknow) interaction was significant (b = 1.04, p < .05). Priming was again significant only among people who were highly knowledgeable and trusting of the media (b = 1.20, se = .53, p < .05). The priming coefficients for the low knowledge/low trust, low knowledge/high trust, and high knowledge/low trust people were .17 (se = .37, n.s.), .26 (se = .46, n.s.), and .36 (se = .57, n.s.), respectively.

We tested whether accessibility mediated priming among these people by estimating the parameters of Models 5 and 6 in Table 2 for them. If accessibility did mediate priming, then the (issue performance x exposure) interaction in Model 6 would be significantly weaker than that in Model 5. But the priming effect was slightly larger in Model 6 (b = 1.31, p < .05) than in Model 5 (b = 1.20, p < .05). Therefore, accessibility did not mediate priming among these people. This was so because media exposure did not increase issue accessibility among them (b = .18, se = .13, n.s.), and more accessible issue-specific performance evaluations did not have more impact on overall performance evaluations (b = -.24, n.s., see Model 7 in Table 2).

Discussion

Nearly two decades ago, Maxwell McCombs (1981), the originator of the agenda-setting hypothesis, called for serious investigation of the mediators and moderators of media effects. Without rich, theory-based understanding of why and when agenda setting happens, he said, we cannot truly appreciate the phenomenon or its implications. In the spirit of McCombs’s plea, we have conducted the first investigation of the cognitive mechanism(s) of priming. And challenging the widely held assumption that accessibility is responsible for shifts in the bases of presidential evaluations, we found no evidence that this was the mechanism at work. Although
### Table 2: Predictors of Overall Presidential Performance Evaluations (Study 2)

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<td>Unemployment Exposure</td>
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Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, and standard errors appear in parentheses.

*p < .10  **p < .05  ***p < .001

News stories did increase the accessibility of issue-related information in memory, accessibility did not determine the weight people placed on an issue when evaluating the President.

No investigator is ever in a position to conclude that a particular phenomenon never occurs on the basis of either a single study or even a set of studies. It is always possible that the conditions necessary to observe the phenomenon were not present in any of those studies and that an additional investigative effort could turn up the expected pattern of results. So we cannot say that priming will never be mediated by accessibility. But our evidence suggests that the primary published documentations of priming are most likely not attributable to accessibility, because our procedures match the procedures used in those studies.

Instead, the mediator at work in past studies was in front of our noses all along: judgments of the national importance of issues. Consequently, two “new” media effects that have been the subject of study in two separate lines of research turn out to be fundamentally linked. These two effects are not isomorphic with one another—many people who manifested agenda setting did not manifest priming. But our results suggest that in order for priming to occur, agenda setting must occur first, and priming sometimes follows.
Political Knowledge

Our finding that knowledge about politics exacerbates priming constitutes the first experimental corroboration of Kroonick and Brannon’s (1993) survey-based evidence of this effect. And our evidence goes beyond Kroonick and Brannon’s (1993) by showing that knowledge only facilitates priming among people who trust the media. Although such individuals could base their presidential evaluations on issues they decide on their own are the most nationally important, some of these people instead apparently rely on trusted media sources to determine which are the most nationally important issues and place special weight on them when evaluating the President. Our results suggest that for this process to occur, one must have the requisite knowledge to interpret, store, and later retrieve and make inferences from news stories they see, hear, or read.

This view contrasts dramatically with conventional wisdom regarding susceptibility to priming. Most accounts have assumed that priming amounts to manipulation of citizens without their awareness or consent. For example, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) characterized people who fall prey to priming as “victims.” And according to Kronick and Kinder, people who manifested priming were “swept away by [an] avalanche of stories and pictures” (1990, 508). Our data paint a strikingly different portrait. People who evidence priming appear not to be unknowing victims of a powerful and manipulative force. Rather, they are political experts, who apparently choose to rely on a source they trust to help them sort through the wealth of information they have obtained in order to make political judgments.

Trust in the News Media

Our evidence that trust plays a central role in regulating media effects comes at a time of increasing interest in trust in other domains of public opinion research (Brehm and Rahn 1997; Putnam 1995). For decades, social scientists have known that trusted sources of information are more persuasive. But because news media priming was thought to result from shifts in accessibility, trust was not recognized to be relevant. Our evidence that trust does play a moderating role suggests that we should instead characterize the process of priming as similar to persuasion, whereby some citizens choose to use the information they glean from media coverage as long as they trust its source.

Although we assessed trust in the news media in general, trust can also be gauged at other levels as well. For example, people may trust television news more or less than they trust newspapers or radio news (see Shaw 1973). And people may trust national broadcast network news programs more or less than they trust cable channel or local broadcast television news programs. Because our experiments presented national broadcast television network news programs, trust in this particular source might have exerted an even more powerful moderating role than we observed. We look forward to future research exploring the impact of trust as gauged at many different levels.

Moderators and Mediators of Agenda Setting

Past studies have produced mixed results regarding whether agenda setting is moderated by political expertise (Hill 1985; Iyengar 1979; Weaver et al. 1981) and media trust (Iyengar and Kinder 1985; Miller and Wanta 1996). Our results suggest that this inconsistency may be the result of a failure to isolate people high in both trust and knowledge. Although agenda setting occurred among people at every level of knowledge and trust, the effect was much stronger among the most trusting and knowledgeable (the coefficients for the low knowledge/low trust, low knowledge/high trust, high knowledge/low trust, and high knowledge/high trust people were .74 (se = .28, p < .01), 1.51 (se = .34, p < .001), 1.54 (se = .33, p < .001), and 2.51 (se = .69, p < .001), respectively). Thus, trust and knowledge appear to moderate agenda setting in much the same way that they moderate priming. This reinforces the notion that agenda setting results partly from a choice by some individuals to make inferences of national problem importance based upon the content of news media coverage.

The finding that agenda setting is strongest among people who both trust the media and know a lot about politics implies that, like priming, agenda setting may be a more thoughtful, deliberate process than previously thought. But agenda setting also occurred among people who were neither highly trusting nor highly knowledgeable, which suggests that agenda setting might also occur automatically and with little cognitive effort among certain citizens. Therefore, agenda setting may be mediated by inference under only some circumstances, and we look forward to future research testing this notion directly.

One could also differentiate between the trustworthiness of the media and the sources upon which they rely for information (see, e.g., Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey 1987). In addition, future studies could examine the effects of media trust using a more reliable measure than the one used here.
Generalizing Our Findings

Priming and agenda setting are very robust effects, having appeared in numerous studies of various different groups of people. Both effects have been observed in representative samples of adults (Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Krosnick and Kinder 1990), in haphazard samples of nonstudent adults (Iyengar and Kinder 1987), and in haphazard samples of college students (Iyengar et al. 1984), as well as using a variety of research methods, including laboratory experiments (Iyengar and Kinder 1987) and analyses of survey data (Krosnick and Brannon 1993). Because no evidence currently suggests that priming operates differently among students than among nonstudents, or differently in the lab than outside the lab, it may be that the findings reported here are applicable to other subpopulations and will appear using other research methods.21

However, there are certainly a number of differences between the studies reported here and the population and context of everyday news media priming. First, adult populations are older than our respondents, and older adults may accumulate stores of knowledge that reinforce and protect their political opinions in a way that more recently acquired knowledge does not for young adults. We documented the immediate impact of a single dose of news coverage on an issue and attitudes, but exposure to many news stories about the same issue over a period of weeks may have different effects. Our laboratory context may have induced people to evaluate presidential job performance more thoughtfully than they would in the course of daily life, minimizing the impact of accessibility that might otherwise have been much stronger. And national importance and accessibility may become strongly correlated over time, because coming to believe an issue is nationally important may cause people to think and talk about it. Thus, the two potential mediators we examined here may increasingly blend into one. Fortunately, recently developed techniques for measuring accessibility in surveys (Bassili 1996) allow future survey studies to explore the generalizability of our findings, and we look forward to seeing the results of such research.

Implications for the Conduct of Politics

Our findings have important implications about the impact of the media on the workings of government. If agenda setting and priming were to occur most among the least politically knowledgeable and involved citizens, these media effects would have relatively muted impact. Surges and declines in these individuals’ beliefs about the national importance of issues and in their presidential approval judgments will certainly be registered by surveys of public opinion, and such surveys do influence policy making (Page and Shapiro 1992). But legislators also pay attention to the messages they receive directly from their constituents (Kingdon 1981), and the least knowledgeable and involved citizens rarely contact legislators to express their opinions or participate in politics in other ways (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Our evidence indicating that agenda setting and priming are instead most prevalent among highly knowledgeable and trusting citizens means that the political impact of these processes is likely to be quite a bit greater. Using data from the 1996 National Election Study, we found that people high in both political knowledge and media trust were especially likely to be male, wealthy, highly educated, high in internal and external political efficacy, and very interested in politics, and were especially likely to have voted in the 1996 national elections. These are all characteristics of people who are politically active (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Consequently, news media influence on them is likely to resonate throughout the world of politics.

The implications of this finding for the health of democracies depends on how news media personnel choose the issues on which to focus coverage. If the media’s decisions about what issues to cover are made using sound standards of newsworthiness, then public reliance on the media to assess national importance and to identify criteria with which to gauge presidential performance can be viewed as sensible and constructive. But if the media’s criteria for coverage were based on something other than newsworthiness, then citizens would not be best served by reliance on the media to make political judgments. Some research suggests that the amount of coverage afforded an issue does covary over time with objective indicators of its national significance (Behr and Iyengar 1985). But sometimes objectively important stories are not afforded much media coverage (e.g., Geyer and Shapiro 1988), and story selection can be partly determined by more idiosyncratic constraints (Gans 1979). However, it is not yet clear whether important stories are routinely excluded from coverage for
such reasons. When research is done to answer this question, the normative implications of our evidence will become clearer.

Conclusion

The work reported here illustrates the value of political psychology for the enterprise of political science. To some, it is enough to know that news media coverage of an issue increases public concern about it and its impact on presidential evaluations. Knowing which citizens are most susceptible is not especially of interest, nor is insight into the cognitive processes that mediate the effects. From this perspective, the political significance of an effect is revealed at the macro, not the micro, level of analysis. Our results show that peering into the minds of citizens can lead to very different characterizations of the interface between political institutions and the public. Agenda setting and priming seemed at first to be evidence of the manipulation of the most vulnerable segment of the electorate. But through the lens of political psychology, we have learned that these effects constitute exchanges between institutions and people that may instead reflect choices made knowingly by the most competent, responsible citizens.

Manuscript submitted April 21, 1999.
Final manuscript received October 15, 1999.

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